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Oma's Story

*Dedicated to my mother and her grandmothers
Bertha, Ada, Martha, Benjamin, Jonathan
and
to my father's loving spirit*

By Nancy Chertok

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Acknowledgements

Heartfelt thanks goes to the many people who have encouraged me through my journey. I am grateful to Jeanne Affelder, Susan Galbraith Cecilia Saavedra, and George and Linda Wolf for their probing questions and readings of early drafts. My friend, Dagmar Schalliol, gave her time generously. While providing the translations from German to English from documents and videotape, Dagmar helped me absorb eyewitness accounts and contemplate methods used to teach students about the Holocaust. She also helped me to further appreciate and anticipate a myriad of responses to the topic of genocide.

Thank you to my cousin Judy whose kindred spirit is present in my writing. My aunt and uncle, Lotte and Walter Newman shared their remarkable story of forgiveness through videotaped footage of their family trip to Mannheim, Hemsbach and Cologne Germany. I am indebted to Lotte for unfolding memories long tucked inside. Lucy Lopata and Ruth Rosenberg helped me understand their early departure from Germany. They clarified how their father and uncle helped friends and relatives get out of concentration camps. I am especially thankful to Lucy and Ruth for their fond memories and images of my grandmother and grandfather.

I am grateful to Harry Birkefeld, the artist who completed the painting of Camp de Gurs and gave the work to my grandmother. I do not know the fate of Mr. Birkefeld, however, his contribution to my conception of the concentration camp experience is significant. I also thank Benjamin Kende and Kende Studios for photographing the painting and delicate documents.

I thank the late Dr. Alfred Wolff for his life saving efforts to help his fellow prisoners in Camp de Gurs. Dr. Wolff helped me comprehend the strength of the human spirit through his speech to the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (1941). Stephen Spielberg and the Shoa Foundation deserve my special thanks. I hope that others view videotaped interviews of survivors and begin to ask questions.

I thank my mother, Oma, with all of my heart. I could not have completed this monograph without her careful attention and unending support. I give my utmost thanks to my husband, Stephen, and sons Avi and Benji for their love, encouragement and patience.

Author's Note

I was driven to write this monograph by the merging of forces. Four months after my father died, the reality of mortality set in. I was aroused by a deep desire to honor my mother, Oma, who happens to be a child survivor of the Holocaust. I chose to delve into my mother's remarkable story as a way of staying close to her. I could not block out the inevitable truth. Survivors, even child survivors, simply are not going to be alive to tell their stories for much longer.

Children who survived the Holocaust have had few adults and virtually no peers who could validate their experience during what was arguably the most tragic time in world history. My mother's own memories were expressed tentatively. In jest, Oma would claim that she was "hatched" because important memories of her own childhood could not be verified. I had heard fragmented accounts and absorbed bewildering emotions that stemmed from life in Nazi Germany. I wanted to unravel the knots and produce as clear a picture as possible of my mother's survival and resilience.

I already had a copy of Oma's videotaped interview produced by Stephen Spielberg's Shoa Foundation. The Shoa Foundation was organized to document survivor's stories and make them available to scholars and future generations. Indebted to the Shoa Foundation, I found my mother's videotape to be an invaluable beginning toward understanding her experience. The trained interviewer maintained purpose and asked questions that gave memories an opportunity to rise. Emotions, however, were contained out of the necessity to get through the chronology of horrific events.

I wanted to explore beyond the videotape and clarify questions raised by the interview. I envisioned creating a work that would be more accessible than the two-hour video I feared would collect dust until my children were ready to sit through its length. I started with the task of transcribing the tape made by Spielberg's foundation. The process of sitting down for hours with a laptop and VCR made it possible for me to remember names and events that I could not previously retain.

My mother and I met for breakfasts as drafts developed and I transformed the transcription into a first person monologue. I used my mother's words adding my own where I probed or thought further description was needed to convey her story. Each time we met, fragments gave way to cohesion, and new perceptions bubbled to the surface. My focus on accuracy,

getting the whole story straight, glided into an awareness of how memories impacted my mother at different stages of her life.

Context and factual information received from sources other than my mother are integrated into the narrative. While some gaps remain, I have chosen to extract only reference material related directly to my mother's memories. The compelling voice of Oma's experience is preserved without conjecture. Aside from the privilege of setting the tone for this memoir, my own experiences that stem from being born a second-generation holocaust survivor are not inserted. Indeed, there are myriads of stories crying out to be told.

It was probably not a coincidence that I decided to write my mother's story when my own two boys reached the ages of seven and nine. I had begun conversing with close friends about the matter of introducing the Holocaust to our children. I learned from mothers that many were afraid of the topic and didn't yet know how or when to introduce the notion of real evil. Personally, I could not remember a time in my childhood that I did not know that my mother had been in a concentration camp. Still, I had no clue how much information my own children could understand. I was haunted by the fact that my mother was only seven when she was imprisoned within a concentration camp and almost nine when her struggle to survive continued in America.

I began to do some research as my writing continued. Starting locally, I contacted The Oak Park Temple and the Roosevelt Middle School in River Forest. I wanted to know how these institutions approached and taught the Holocaust. My inquiries were met with compassionate interest and an invitation to present my mother's story to fifth graders. I began to learn from the children. My mother agreed to tell her story and as she spoke I observed the astonished interest, genuine curiosity and sorrowful dismay of the captivated audience, mostly eleven year olds.

The final addendum is an essay written by my son after hearing his grandmother tell her story to the fifth grade class at Roosevelt School. My son was nine years old at the time. He has helped me to understand what he can absorb about his grandmother's experience in World War II. He has reminded me that life is what happens when you're trying to figure it out. Writing and talking with the next generation of children about the Holocaust is happening. I hope that this memoir can help in the process.

One

“So Oma, did you have *any* fun at all during World War II?”

Benjamin Chertok 6 years old, 1999

Who but my grandson Benji could ask such a question? So original and honest. Trepidation. I love this child. How do I give a deserving, an engaging answer?

“Yes... we did have some fun times. I remember playing games and having a few friends. I remember a lot of mud.”

Some day he'll know the full story. Right now it's pieces. Maybe it will always be pieces. Depending on who is recounting, some of the pieces will seem like they'll never fit.

If Benji talks to his Great Aunt Lotte about the war years, memory will reveal my sister's experience at the tender age of sixteen. I was only five when my memories started and began disappearing.

I was born Inge Maas on December 19th, 1932 in Mannheim, Germany. Now, I'm sixty-seven years old. There aren't many relatives left to ask about the past. My mother's father died when I was very young and my father's parents died before my parents married. My father did have three siblings, Willie, Selma and Klara. Willie immigrated to the United States before 1938 and passed away years ago. Selma, her husband Joseph and Klara were killed under the reign of the Nazis. They were deported to the concentration camp, Gurs, in 1940. Camp de Gurs was the first and largest internment camp located in France. Klara died in Gurs and Selma and Joseph were transferred to Auschwitz, the notorious death camp run by the Nazi government. Selma and Joseph were two of the estimated millions killed in Auschwitz. The lives of almost 6,000 people were terminated daily by the end of the camp's operation.

Memories of my father's family were shredded by the Holocaust. The overriding fact of death was all that was handed down. Like most of humanity, I never was able to learn about the personalities, warmth or spirit of those who died because of Nazi terrorism.

My mother, Stefani, had a twin sister, Zilla, and four other siblings, Martha, Mina, Else, and Louie. My Oma, Klara Westheimer lived in Mannheim near most of her children. Aunt Mina lived in Pfalz, the state adjacent to ours and Aunt Martha lived in Hainsfurt, Bavaria.

A few years before Kristallnacht, Mina and Else fled Germany with their families. Prejudice had increased dramatically. Neighbors, once friends, had begun to ostracize my cousins. The decision to leave Germany for America required great fortitude. Relatives who left their homes in the early 1930's were already deeply affected by anti-Semitism and less optimistic than others who believed that Nazi fascism could not last. Many people viewed National Socialism like the measles, a passing sickness that had to be endured.

After the devastation of Kristallnacht, Aunt Zilla and Uncle Louie immigrated to the United States. The Nazi government had used the killing of a German diplomat by a German born Jew as an excuse to destroy and kill on November 9th and 10th, 1938. Nazis burned Jewish synagogues, destroyed and looted Jewish owned businesses, terrorized and beat people and sent Jews to concentration camps. Seventy five hundred Jewish shop windows were broken and twenty thousand Jewish men were incarcerated. There was so much broken glass that the riots became known as Kristallnacht. Dressed as civilians, the looters wore the uniform boots of the Nazi Party. Police were ordered not to interfere with attacks. Only years later did I learn that Jews were forced to pay an additional one billion marks (about four million dollars) for the damage caused by the Nazis.¹

My Aunt Martha and her husband did not survive the war years. They died after the Nazis forced them into a work camp. Fortunately, their daughter had been sent to England though the kindertransport, a special program developed to help children escape Nazi brutality. My cousin Bertie was eventually able to immigrate to the United States. I've tried to imagine the emotions my cousin confronted. While lucky to be alive, Bertie was severed from her parents forever.

Few relatives reminisced about life during my formative years. As I grew into adulthood, I had fervent but sparse memories that differed from my sister's recollections. We could not gain compassion from each other for the feelings surrounding events forgotten or too painful to talk about. I was the youngest survivor and for years I felt that the memories of others were more important than those evoked by a child.

Truth is told, I do remember parts of my family life in Germany.

¹ Ten Thousand Children, Anne Fox and Eva Abraham-Podietz, Berhman House, Inc. 1999

I lived with my father, Ferdinand, my mother, Stefani and my sister, Lotte who was ten years older than I. My sister and I were raised in a Jewish home but I have few recollections of going to synagogue. Of course, by the time I was five, the synagogues were nearly all destroyed. I was certainly aware of being Jewish and of some traditions, not orthodox as I now understand it, but conservative. My family prepared food in accordance with Jewish dietary laws until the Nazis outlawed kosher butchers. I have a strong memory of the Seder ritual because I was locked inside the concentration camp on Passover. I was only eight years old. Somehow, we held a Seder inside the concentration camp... ah, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

I lived in an apartment in Mannheim, an urban area. I can't picture our apartment but I remember that we moved to some kind of an attic situation. I have sparse memories of a building and an air raid shelter. I can't say I have any sense of having a room or having a living room or any of the things that one associates with living in a home or an apartment. My sister has told me that we lived in a beautiful house with big furniture and wall-to-wall carpeting. When laws passed that Jews must have two people living in one room, we had to give up our home. We moved near my father's business in the inner city. This apartment *was* attic like with one bedroom, a kitchen and a bathroom. My mother had to cut down the furniture to fit it into our small cramped apartment.

We spoke German at home. I was the least Jewish appearing member of my family. I had blond hair and I looked different from my mother, father and sister. The other family members were more dark skinned and dark haired. I had a sense of being nearly a shill. My family sent me to do things that were O.K. for non-Jewish people to do but not for Jewish people to do; basic errands like going to the grocery store. I did not know that Hitler's government had actually passed laws, the Nuremberg Laws, that deprived Jews of rights as German citizens. When I was three years old Jewish newspapers could no longer be sold on the street. I did not know it at the time but my whole family was forced to add a German middle name when I was six years old. Like countless Jewish females, the name "Sarah" was added to my documents.

I don't recall going to school but I did know how to read and write German. I think my mother must have taught me but to this day, how I learned to read and write in German is a mystery to me. Jews were certainly no longer allowed to go to schools at the point when I was ready.

On November 10th, 1938, Kristallnacht, my father was away on a business trip; it was also his birthday. I was aware that everybody was anxious about what had happened to him. I knew that my uncle had been picked up

and that the men we knew were being seized and taken to Dachau. I kept hearing about Dachau but I didn't know what it was or why it was important. I don't know how long my innocence lasted before I learned that Dachau, situated near Munich, was the first concentration camp and became a model for additional encampments.

I was five, almost six, in 1938. I remember being sent to the door when there was a loud knock. It was late at night. My father still wasn't home and we had no idea where he was. My mother voiced concern, dread. My sister was away at school and wasn't around. I was sent to open the door and two giants, like from an evil fairytale, confronted me. The giants, who were Nazis, looked to be 10 feet tall. They flung me to the side and said, "Wo sind die männer?" (Where are the men?) I felt terrified and enraged. I was small, slight and completely powerless. The Nazis entered the house and ransacked. When they didn't find my father they went away. I still don't know why I was the one told to open the door. Maybe my mother thought we would be in less danger if a child presented; surely a child would not be harmed.

There are two accounts about how my father got away that night. One story is that a brave customer hid him. The other is that his chauffeur kept driving him around and around. I'm not sure which report is true; maybe both happened. I also heard that the Nazis took the keys to my father's business on Kristallnacht. Our courageous chauffeur got the keys back to us.

Our family did have a chauffeur so I guess we were well to do. We had a lot of belongings that were packed in a big van to be shipped to the United States. We had our immigration quota number. Governments, including the United States, restricted the number of people immigrating through the use of quotas. The van and our possessions were confiscated and we never saw our things again.

My father kept working until early 1939 when the Nazis closed up his shop and he was no longer allowed to work. My father had a successful wholesale leather business, dealing in leather sold to shoemakers. My mother worked too, she helped with the bookkeeping.

I know I was six the last time I saw my father. It was 1939; I don't know the exact date. The Nazis again came in the middle of the night. My father awakened me. I had been in a sound sleep. I sensed importance; my father traveled a lot and I had never been aroused before his trips. I felt a vague connection of events. Was this a continuation of Kristallnacht? My father said he had to go but that he would be back. I think he truly thought he would be back. I believed him and there wasn't a thought between us that he wouldn't return.

My father was taken to Sachsenhausen, one of the first three concentration camps, located near Berlin. I heard he was charged with making a comment against the Reich. Both my parents and sister had been taking English lessons from a woman who was said to have been some kind of a spy. During class, my father commented that England had never lost a war with Germany. The teacher reported my father's statement and he was arrested.

The Nazis told my mother that they would release my father if we could get a passport for him out of the country. Genocide had not yet transpired in 1939. The government wanted to get Jews out of Germany and people did leave. Getting out depended on our quota number and largely on who would have us, what country would take us. As I understand it, my mother and sister worked feverishly to obtain a number of different passports and passages for my father to emigrate. While my mother and sister ran to and fro, I was left in the care of a governess, Frau Hesse, in Heidelberg.

Finally, we thought my father might be released to leave the country. My mother had sent a packed suitcase for my father to Genoa, Italy. He was supposed to take the train that would stop in Mannheim and continue on to Italy. Desperate to see my father for only minutes, my mother and sister waited at the train platform. Their wait was endless. My father never arrived.

Frenzy gave way to crisis. My mother and sister created new plans and traveled to Sachsenhausen with more of the "proper documents". This time, I was left for two or three weeks with Frauline Traub. According to my sister, Frauline Traub was my nursery school teacher but I have no memory of staying with her or of having gone to nursery school.

I later learned that when my mother and sister got to Sachsenhausen, the SS guards turned them away; they could not get inside. The Nazis would not talk to Jews. My mother and sister did see the Nazis forcing the prisoners to move heavy bricks, working the prisoners to death. They never saw my father.

Turned away from Sachsenhausen, Lotte and my mother traveled to Berlin and contacted a lawyer. No one could help. By prearrangement, my mother and sister stayed overnight with a Jewish family in Berlin. It was the end of Passover.

Until this year, I never knew how my mother and sister learned of my father's death. Breaking the silence, my middle daughter asked my sister Lotte how she had learned about Ferdinand's death. I never thought to ask this question but now I am relieved to have the answer. The Jewish community in Mannheim had received word that my father was dead just after my mother left for Sachsenhausen. No details were provided by the German authorities. Someone from Mannheim traveled to Berlin to bring my mother the horrible

news. Lotte and mother were having tea in the host family's living room when they learned the terrible truth. My sister's migraines began on the train ride home.

Our family sat Shiva upon my mother's return. I was too young to understand that Shiva was a Jewish tradition that was supposed to offer me protection from isolation during this time of mourning. I commented on how nice it was that the grown ups sat on little chairs like me. I was criticized for being insolent and I was confused.

Sometime later, my father's ashes were sent to us back in Mannheim. Still, I could not internalize my father's death. I was only six years old. In my mind, the Nazis gave their word that my father was to be released at the beginning of Passover. As ludicrous as it now sounds, I believed the Nazis. I did not let go of my father. What if the ashes were not his? I believed that my father would be back someday just as he had said when he woke me to say goodbye. I felt horrible rejection that I thought was coming from my mother and my sister. Lotte was my mother's rock and the two had closeness in their mourning. My mother put on black clothing and never wore anything but black again.

Somehow, life went on in Mannheim. I remember living in an attic location and evacuating to air raid shelters. I recall a larger air raid shelter connected to my father's leather business and one air raid in particular. I was very frightened, the sirens and the British bombs were near. People from our building stayed with us in the shelter. A woman, a neighbor, touched me on the head and comforted me. Someone reported that this woman patted the head of a Jewish child. Soon after, my family could no longer stay in that air raid shelter. We found a smaller shelter and stayed there after my father was taken away.

We remained in Mannheim because our quota number was high and it wasn't our turn to leave. We still tried to get out by obtaining passports to enter different countries. My grandmother, Oma, was admitted on board the ship, the St. Louis on May 13, 1939. As fate would have it, the ship became known as "The Voyage of the Damned". In fact, the American film industry created a Hollywood movie rendition of the St. Louis by that title. No country would let the ship land and allow the people to get off. I remember agitated talk and worry about my grandmother. My mother, already deeply depressed, now faced the real threat of losing her own mother as the uncertain fate of the St. Louis continued. Most of the passengers including my grandmother had purchased landing permits for Cuba. Oma planned to wait in Cuba until the United States called her quota number. There were over 900 other passengers

and none of them knew that the Cuban Government had already invalidated the landing permits, issued by the corrupt Cuban director of immigration.

The St. Louis arrived in Havana harbor but Cuban officials denied entry to all but a few passengers. The Cuban government forced the ship to eventually leave the harbor and the ship's captain piloted the St. Louis to the Florida coast in hopes that the United States would accept passengers. The State Department, however, refused to intervene in Cuban affairs, and the Coast Guard did not allow the ship entrance into American waters. My Oma was adrift at sea for over a month before governments and agencies finally granted the refugees a temporary retreat. The St. Louis docked in Antwerp Belgium on June 17, 1939.² My Oma was back in Europe preparing for war.

It wouldn't have done any good for me to voice feelings at that point. No one caring for me could listen. I was like an invisible sponge soaking up fears and confusion. My grandmother turned out to be one of the lucky passengers aboard the St. Louis. She was taken to Holland and was eventually able to immigrate into the United States. I didn't know then that my special relationship with my Oma would rekindle years later.

² Excerpt from: "Voyage of the St. Louis, Introduction: the Route Taken". Special exhibition, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 100 Raoul Wallenberg Place SW, Washington, D.C. 20024

Postcard stamped from within Sachsenhausen concentration camp.

This postcard was the last correspondence that Inge received from her father, Ferdinand Maas. Ferdinand died in Sachsenhausen.

Inge Maas (right) with governess Frau Hesse and unknown girl in Heidelberg.

Inge was sent to stay with Frau Hesse while attempts were made to free her father from Sachsenhausen concentration camp.

Two

The rumors were rampant in October 1940. Electrifying fears flared but we did not know that all the Jews in Baden and Pfalz were being systematically rounded and shipped out. On a clear sunny Tuesday morning, October 22, approximately 11,000 people, all Jews of Baden and Pfalz were arrested. The impossibility of mass capture could not be fathomed. Years later I would find out that hundreds of individuals committed suicide. I remember overhearing my mother and my sister talking about whether we should flee, try to leave Mannheim and search for my aunt in Bavaria. My aunt was the only close relative who was still in Germany.

I also had a sense that somewhere along the line my mother wanted to kill her self, turn on the kitchen stove and inhale the gas. I don't remember the episode clearly but I felt like I was to blame. If it hadn't been for me, my mother might have chosen suicide and perhaps this alternative might have been better for her. I never talked about my dark thoughts with my mother or sister. My sister did talk with her daughter and my children about that harrowing experience at the kitchen stove after we were all grown. My mother had in fact wanted to turn on the gas. Lotte talked our mother out of suicide, imploring her to go on living for me.

Anyway, we didn't flee and we didn't turn on the gas. So the next day, the Gestapo knocked on the door and said that we had one hour to pack. I think my mother had started to prepare the night before. I remember her sewing money into the linings of coats and stuffing money into bread. I now know that those arrested were allowed to take 100 pounds of luggage and 100 Marks (forty dollars). All other property was declared Judengut, confiscated Jewish property.³ I had a suitcase, some clothes and that was it.

The Nazis took us from the apartment and marched us through the town. It seemed like a long stream of marchers, like a parade. Like peace marches I've been on for positive reasons in my later years. I felt the deep commonality between people. We were all there for one purpose. I was a part of something big and all I could see was an ocean of people ahead of me, behind me and crowded next to me. We were marched through Mannheim. I remember people from the city spitting on us, throwing stones and yelling names, epithets at us. I remember finding it arduous, nearly impossible to drag my suitcase. I was resentful and in pain. I kept thinking

³ "Medical and Social Experiences in a French Concentration Camp", by Dr. Alfred Wolff, Brooklyn N.Y., probable date 1944. Speech transcription by daughter, Anne Wolff Kaiser, November 1996

that if my father were alive, he'd help me carry my suitcase. I was seven and not very big. The suitcase was cumbersome, weighty. I didn't think anybody really paid a whole lot of attention to what a child was feeling.

We didn't have a clue where we were going. We were herded to the train station, put on trains. There is an account of the train written in a book, *Eichman in Jerusalem*, by Hannah Arendt.⁴ I was amazed to see the reference. The account described this specific transport as being the first of a massive roundup of Jews from a particular geographical location. Eichman, himself, met up with the train and accompanied it because of its significance. I remember some excruciating times on the train, of being hungry and cold and crowded upon. I tried to lie down. Somebody stepped on my finger and I was afraid to death to say anything. I was traumatized by that train trip, the severe discomfort and not knowing what was next. I felt very alone. I was with my mother and my sister but I never experienced such isolation. Abandonment.

As an adult I figured out that our journey lasted three horrendous days and two unbearable nights. The train traveled through Alsace, Burgoyne, and the Rhone Valley to the small town of Oleron not far from the Spanish border and the Pyrenees Mountains. I have no memory of the facts only the horror. I understand that the train stopped only once for about thirty minutes during the long trip. We were given our only meal, one cup of green pea soup and two slices of bread.⁵

We were taken to the foot of the Pyrenees Mountains in France to Camp De Gurs a camp originally built in 1937 for the Spanish Loyalists who lost their civil war. From what I've learned, The Vichy French and the German government had confiscated the camp and were using it to store ammunitions just before we arrived. The Vichy French were to guard us, the deportees from Nazi Germany. When our train arrived at night the French authorities expected 900 deportees and 9,800 arrived. The shocked French military officials took us from the train stop in Oleron to Camps de Gurs by cars.⁶

When we got off the train we arrived at an extremely muddy site. Several feet of mud surrounded primitive barracks because of the heavy rain. There were no beds and no straw to sleep on when we arrived. I was one of the nearly 10,000 exhausted and terrorized people who stood in an empty

⁴ Eichmann in Jerusalem A Report on the Banality of Evil, Hannah Arendt, Penguin Books, 1994

⁵ "Medical and Social Experiences in a French Concentration Camp"

⁶ Gurs Deportation und Schicksal der badisch-pfalzischen Juden 1940-1945, Johannes Obst, Gesamtverantwortung, 1986. Reference translated by Dagmar Schalliol, Ph.D., 2000

primitive barrack. We had no covers, no blankets, no stoves, nothing. When we came, nothing was organized, not food, distributions, nor even the most archaic wash stations. A moveable gate heavily guarded by police closed the entrance to Camp de Gurs. I've read that the camp was two kilometers long and five hundred meters wide and completely surrounded by several barbed wire fences. A paved street ran through the middle of Gurs. One level barracks covered with tarpaper lined both sides of the street. Every twenty-five barracks was again entrapped by barbed wire and called an ilots (akin to island). The ilots for men were in front of the camp close to the main entrance. Another gate and more guards separated the men from the women and children. Each barrack was twenty-five meters long, five meters wide and housed about sixty people in cramped conditions. The barracks had no windows except for wooded flaps. The adults had to choose between letting in cold and rain and living in darkness. Rain leaked through the roofs. The floors were covered with dirty wood boards or mud and there were no tables or chairs. People had to stand all day or lie on the floor. Mud between barracks was knee deep by adult standard making endeavors outside almost impossible. I heard that the elderly inmates broke bones and fainted while trapped in the mud.⁷

I sensed that the adults learned quickly that hope of assistance from the French administration was futile. I now find it paradoxical that Jewish immigrants sought escape from persecution in France prior to 1940. The French government had decreed that people could be fined or incarcerated for defaming individuals for their religious beliefs in April 1939. Then, on August 27, 1940 the Vichy Government official, Marechal Petain, abolished this decree. Petain's action permitted Nazi propaganda to flourish and Jews to be incarcerated in unoccupied areas of France. The Vichy French Government was quick to conform to fascist norms.⁸

We slept on the bare floor at first and got some straw after awhile. The mud was just terrible. I couldn't walk around but I remember other children and playing games, jumping around. People lived in whatever clothes they had. I remember darkness but I have read that some barracks had weak electric light turned on for a couple of hours in the evening. The toilet facility was an outhouse with two big holes and barrels and I had a tremendous fear of falling in.

⁷ Gurs Deportation und Schicksal der badisch-pfalzischen Juden 1940-1945,

⁸ Ibid

An oven was brought to each barrack for warmth but not until the spring of 1941. There was a constant lack of material to burn. The winter was bitter and gray. The sky held unrelenting rain, fog and the foul mixed odors of urine, mud and clothes that were worn much too long.⁹

The rats overran the camp and it was full of disease and dysentery. I remember being terrified of the rats. (I still have a rat phobia today.) But, I had a cat that somehow got into the camp. I thought the cat would keep me safe, keep me from getting bitten by the rats.

Food consisted of turnip soup twice a day, watery coffee in the morning and an allocation of bread. I was hungry a lot. My sister worked in the camp post office. Packages arrived every once in awhile and on those rare occasions, we received food that wasn't turnips. The cat got to lick the oil from a can of sardines that we received from Portugal. Mina and Albert Mayer, relatives in the United States, paid for packages. At some point, the men were given some extra food for working. There was some visiting back and forth between ilots and my mother's friend got a potato from her husband. She shared that potato with us. The main diet was monotonous turnips with an overwhelming horrible odor. I can't eat turnips to this day.

Unbeknown to me, the camp's inmates arranged a kind of self-government and arranged the framework of health and medical care as far as possible without any sanitary installations, without any instruments and without any medications.¹⁰ A children's barrack was established in Ilot K in order to procure a little better control and to spare the children abrupt view of the sick and dying.¹¹ I was separated from my mother and sister and placed into the children's barrack. My sister was ten years older and considered an adult at seventeen so she got to stay with my mother. I was placed with about fifteen to twenty children, boys and girls. I believe we were all under the age of ten or twelve. I have a sense of friendship and camaraderie and laughing and playing games. I remember some French children and I learned to speak their language. I don't have a sense that there was any routine or that anyone was in charge or that there was any discipline.

I recall seeing my mother sporadically, but not often. Tickets were required for passage between ilots. It took up to two weeks to obtain a ticket to see relatives. According to my research, guards distributed approximately

⁹ Gurs Deportation und Schicksal der badisch-pfalzischen Juden 1940-1945

¹⁰ "Medical and Social Experiences in a French Concentration Camp"

¹¹ Gurs Deportation und Schicksal der badisch-pfalzischen Juden 1940-1945

fifteen to twenty-five tickets a day. People employed a different tactic to see family. Since participation was allowed at funerals, many inmates attended. The joy of seeing a relative was mostly overshadowed by the morose massiveness of the funerals. Frequently, inmates only heard of the death of a loved one as the names of the dead were read.¹²

I remember rumors spreading that children were going to be taken out of Gurs and transported somewhere else. Anguished, my mother stressed how important it was for us to stay together. I remember hiding under the barracks when the rumors would go out that the transports were coming. I would hide under the barracks and feel terrified, mostly about rats. Those memories have a dream like quality. They're really hard to focus on. My cat, I named it Mule, was my only protection.

I don't know if children were really transported elsewhere. When I was a teenager, I began to feel anger about hiding under the barracks. If in fact the children could have been saved and if the transports were a rescue, why wouldn't I have been allowed to do that? I believed that the trucks were rescuing the children. Did my mother? Why was she so afraid? As an adolescent I perceived that my mother would not let me have what the other children had, a chance at freedom. Now, I wonder if she knew something that I did not.

Once in a while I went to my mother and sister's barrack. Their barrack seemed more crowded. Maybe because the adults were bigger they took up more space. I don't remember doing anything outside with my mother or sister. My mother was very sick and I have a vague recollection of seeing her in an infirmary. There were so many sick people sorely neglected. Thankfully I could not absorb the scope of suffering. The reality of disease and starvation hit only after I read an account given by Dr. Alfred Wolff, a survivor and volunteer leader of the women's hospital at Camp de Gurs. Dr. Wolff was an obstetrician and gynecologist from Mannheim who was deported and incarcerated with us. He later reported that out of 13,800 persons, 1,055 died in the first five months. Some people died from nothing but hunger. Physician prisoners provided leadership in a makeshift camp hospital. The sick presented with severe edema (swelling from head to toe), painful kidney troubles, serious psychological and nerve damage, hunger delirium and amnesia. Vitamin deficiencies included scurvy, neuritis, anemia and osteoporosis especially in children and expectant mothers. Relatively simple infectious diseases became worse or deadly from lack of

¹² Gurs Deportation und Schicksal der badisch-pfalzischen Juden 1940-1945

resistance and the danger of tuberculosis grew because of the dirt, malnutrition and terrible sanitary conditions. Epidemics of scurvy, meningitis and tuberculosis killed young and old. Only eight buckets of water were provided per one thousand people.¹³ Fleas, lice, rats, mud and cold ravaged the camp. The winter of 1940/41 was filled with hunger, desperation, homesickness, death and numbness.

I had a feeling I might die from the rats. I know I had a birthday. Before the camp, birthdays were special days and I was showered with a lot of gifts. I don't remember my birthday in the camp.

There was a constant struggle to try to get us out. My mother and sister tried to reach family in the United States to get us free. My sister spoke English so she had to be the spokesperson for us. My mother didn't speak English and she was weak, ailing. My sister had a lot of responsibility at the age of seventeen.

The first time I was ever on stage was in the concentration camp. We were part of a massive Seder and I was chosen to ask the four questions, the queries asked traditionally by the youngest boy during a Seder. I was honored and quite comfortable; I must have known some Hebrew. I liked being noticed. Being on stage was a departure from the day-to-day invisibility and I remember a moment of warmth in the limelight. We read from a primitive hagaddah that was made inside the concentration camp. A rabbi who had befriended my mother gave the hagaddah to me. Somehow the hagaddah, the written narrative of the Jewish exodus from slavery to freedom, survived our incarceration. I held on to it for over forty years before donating it to the United States Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C.

Today I am humbled by the astonishing cultural activity within Camp de Gurs between the fall of 1940 and March 1941. Fellow inmates made a concerted effort to develop a varied cultural life to help compensate for the dreadful daily life. I studied the heroic details from Dr. Alfred Wolff's speech, presented to a subcommittee of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. Imprisoned physicians realized that only a rich level of entertainment would lift our ghoulish depression, the so-called "Barbed Wire Disease". Inmates persuaded the French Authorities to allow a "cultural barrack" with a primitive stage that was painted in a friendly manner. A committee of artists, teachers, professional musicians and

¹³ Gurs Deportation und Schicksal der badisch-pfalzischen Juden 1940-1945

physicians provided leadership. Two conductors and about twenty-five professional musicians formed a jazz band and an orchestra for classical concerts. While money was always lacking when the doctors wanted something for the starving people, hospital or the pharmacy, the authorities found funds when one of the bandleaders or stage director wanted something. In addition to the light and serious music inmates gave first class lectures. Dr. Wolff recalled spending hours listening to talks about Modern Art, Geopolitics, modern development in Biology, Physics, and Chemistry all given by excellent and well-known experts. Professor Pringsheim, brother in law of Thomas Mann, spoke about the Munich of old times. The actor and pupil of Max Reinhardt, the gifted Hans Behrendt, discussed the culture of Berlin before World War I. A former representative and lawyer from Mannheim spoke about the Mannheim Theater.¹⁴

I did not know that the prisoners found enough teachers to establish a real elementary school with six classes. I have no memory of classes but maybe I learned to read and write German in the concentration camp. For the older youth, high school classes were formed in French, English, Spanish, Mathematics and Physics. Hundreds of adults arranged and participated in language courses, French, English Spanish and Hebrew. In addition to the vocational education and entertainment all available methods were used to fight the lethal monotony. A football club and athletic “club” were started, even though so many prisoners were in devastating physical condition. Later, we received some games thanks to the YMCA. Chess, Bridge and Skat championships were fought out.¹⁵

A lot of problems had to be solved in this small community; assistance of the financially weak, the distribution of all the money and materials collected abroad and preparation for emigration. A voluntary committee, the C.S.S., Comité Social Secours, was organized under the excellent chairmanship of Rabbi Dr. Anspacher. The committee had delegates from every ilot. Dr. Wolff observed the committee members settle many disputes and solve many difficulties without showing preference to religion, country of origin, or political opinion.¹⁶ As a child I never realized that the terrible days of Camp de Gurs were marked by valor and kindness.

Despite the adult’s efforts to engage me in holiday spirit, Passover still became the anniversary of my father’s murder and the broken promise

¹⁴ “Medical and Social Experiences in a French Concentration Camp”

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid

of his return. For most of my life, I have associated Passover with my father's death and asking the four questions to the sea of people in Camp de Gurs. No wonder, when I grew up and had my own family, I couldn't celebrate. As a young adult the memories grew sadder. I was robbed of any sense of holiday joy. My own kids saw me cry a lot on Passover.

It wasn't until I had grandchildren that I could participate and have *some* fun on Passover. Despite the dissolution of any desire to engage in the Passover rituals, I can still recite the prayers and sing with pleasure when I'm with my grandchildren. I think I must have had a solid foundation of love and Jewish teachings before the age of six. But, to this day, I still tell my daughter that I feel like forgetting the whole holiday when she invites me to Passover. Every year, I accept her invitation and participate. I always make the matzo ball soup.

Painting of Camp de Gurs, May 1941 (front and back)

Artist, Harry Berkefeld completed the painting while imprisoned in the concentration camp, Camp de Gurs. Gurs was located in France near the base of the Pyrenees Mountains. Photographed by Benjamin Kende, 2001

Haggadah used during Passover Seder, Camp de Gurs, concentration camp, 1941.

Joan (Inge) Maas, child survivor, asked the four questions and was given the Haggadah at the age of eight

Satirical comic strip made by a prisoner at Camp de Gurs.

Stefani Maas was able to buy the artwork for her daughter Lotte. The comic strip and Stefani's desire to obtain the colorful piece while incarcerated is testimony to the human spirit.

Three

I came to Camp de Gurs in October 1940 and I believe we got out in October 1941. We were able to finally obtain the proper papers from relatives in the United States, the same relatives who left Germany before Kristallnacht. My oldest aunt, Aunt Mina, lived in St. Louis. Aunt Mina married a heroic man, Albert Mayer, who had a brother, Emil Mayer. Emil was an attorney and an activist in the Jewish Federation. He also had a connection, a friend in the American Consulate. Uncle Emil was able to get us the visas and the documentation to prove that we would not be a burden to the United States government. Uncle Albert was able to pay our travel expenses. As I understand it, these two brothers were able to free a number of people from Gurs by cosigning documents and paying authorities. At that time, there was still a possibility of getting out of France, provided one was lucky enough to fulfill all the necessary requirements. Each prisoner had to have a visa from a country abroad, transfer visas, a visa for departure issued by the Vichy government, a ticket for the trip by ship, and money for the costs of traveling (about four hundred dollars). Some guards took bribes and let prisoners flee. According to my research, about 2000 people from Gurs were able to emigrate before 1942.¹⁷ If there had been a world that would have wanted to take in the Jews from Germany or from the camps, many could have been saved. After January 20, 1942, Himmler regulated and prohibited any further emigration by Jews.¹⁸

Although we had obtained the affidavits from Uncle Albert, the Nazis did not release us. Sick and distraught, mother finally had the opportunity to ask another prisoner how some people were able to leave. My mother was told to put money in an envelope with the papers. Finally, we got out of Gurs with a bribe. Two policemen took my mother, sister and me to Hotel Bomparte, a transit camp for women and children in Marseille, France.

Until this year, I never understood how I was separated from my mother and sister in Marseille. After a year of hiding under rat infested barracks to prevent separation, I was sent away alone. I was brought to the French countryside for respite. I remember tasting milk for the first time in a year. Someone let me herd some sheep. Good feelings stirred inside me.

¹⁷ Gurs Deportation und Schicksal der badisch-pfalzischen Juden 1940-1945

¹⁸ Ibid.

Having a bed to sleep in soothed me. But, true comfort was marred by isolation. I wasn't sure if I would see my mother or sister again.

For decades, my sister and I had incongruent memories surrounding our separation. Lotte simply said that she could not remember any parting. I was pained because no one could validate my experience. There were not many places where I could look for clues. Then, one evening, about fifteen years ago, I saw a television documentary called *Weapons of the Spirit* directed by Pierre Sauvage.¹⁹ The film showed a little village northeast of Camp de Gurs. In fact, it showed an overview of the concentration camp with the barracks in the background. I had a sense that I was on a farm in that village, Le Chambon. The people of Le Chambon, a Protestant town in Southern France, quietly and peacefully organized their private lives to save thousands of Jewish children and adults during the Holocaust. Adhering to a higher ethical power, clergy and townspeople hid and integrated Jewish refugees into their village. Underground networks of anonymous villagers also helped countless Jewish people escape the Nazis before their capture. The Chambonnais protected approximately 5000 Jews from terrorism and extermination.²⁰ I wrote to Pierre Sauvage to see if there were any records kept but there were none, documentation was too dangerous. Armed with nothing except a child's memory, I was not able to establish what happened to me or who helped me.

It wasn't until March 2001, that my sister Lotte recalled events and particulars that could corroborate my persistent memories of the farm. It turned out that shortly after we arrived in Marseille, Lotte was able to find an address of a friend, Mariana Hersh, who lived with her mother in the French countryside. Lotte obtained permission to bring me to this family for a few weeks while she worked to get us the necessary visas to Spain and Portugal. I have no memory of my sister taking me to find Mariana's house. Neither Lotte nor I know how I was brought back to my sister and mother in Marseille. Still, I was astonished to learn that my sister could provide me with the verification that I longed for sixty years.

I'm sure I was glad when I saw my mother and sister again at the transit camp but I felt an overwhelming isolation. I had had some camaraderie on the farm. I had a chance to get away from my mother's depression. When I returned, everything was so sad again. My mother was terribly sick, she cried and wore black all of the time. There was an aura of

¹⁹ "Weapons of the Spirit", film documentary by Pierre Savage, First Run Features, New York, NY.

²⁰ Lest Innocent Blood be Shed, Philip Hallie, Harper Colophon Books, Harper & Row, 1980

sadness that was gruesome to an eight year old. My mother was the person charged with taking care of me.

My mother was a heroine to everyone around me. I don't remember my mother ever complaining. Everyone said that she was wonderful. I thought that I should feel that she was wonderful too, but I did not. I understood how awful the times were for the adults. I did not blame my mother for anything and never spoke ill of her. There just wasn't any room left for talking about my feelings. Perhaps, I was more like my mother than I realized - I didn't complain and I wasn't focused except for feeling very sad.

Hotel Bomparte was quasi-controlled. It wasn't a concentration camp but there were curfews and rules. We had to be present by six o'clock every evening. There was an outdoor garden and six people had to share one room. I was told that we would be coming to the United States but we had to wait there for months due to bureaucratic delays. I have a photograph of myself acting in a play with other children while we were detained. I sang a French song; *Trois jeune tambour de reve del la guerre...* It means three boys went off to war or something like that. I don't know who saw the play.

I wasn't aware of the angst surrounding our departure from Marseille that Saturday. We were finally scheduled to leave for Spain to catch the ship to the United States. According to my sister, our money had not yet arrived hours before we needed to board the train. My sister ran frantically to obtain verification that we had been approved to emigrate. Someone took pity and compassionately gave our family the money to embark on our journey.

I remember the short train trip to Portugal where we had a cousin, Fritz Westheimer. As I now understand it, Fritz was the cousin who was able to get money and some food into the concentration camp for my mother, sister and I. These efforts were driven and reimbursed by my vigilant relatives in the United States, Aunt Mina, Uncle Albert and Uncle Emil.

Our relatives had arranged for us to stay in a beautiful hotel in Lisbon. Fortunately, I do not remember the devastating embarrassment that my mother and sister experienced when we walked into the luxurious lodging. We had nothing and looked worse than tattered. We stayed in our hotel room, too humiliated to be seen. My mother and sister were reminded intensely of our losses and felt alienated by such lavish accommodations.

We traveled to Lisbon and stayed for a day or two before boarding the ship, Exeter. I remember walking on to that ship to come to the United States! My sister remembered more than I did about the voyage. Lotte remembered the Exeter as a luxury liner filled with about two hundred

refugees from many countries. Only one other family from Gurs was on board. Almost everyone was sick. My sister recalled having dinner in the dining room alone; she was the only one who could make it to the table. Surrounded by waiters all to her self, Lotte had a chance to feel special, perhaps the first time in years.

We sailed for about seven or eight days in December of 1941. We arrived December 8th, 1941 the day after Japan attacked the United States naval base at Pearl Harbor. I remember being on the ship when the announcements came. My mother must have told me that America was at war. There was fear about whether or not we would be able to land. That fear might have been there anyway. After all of the things that happened up until then, who could believe it was time to be free?

Visa documentation validating passage for Inge Maas through Portugal to the United States.

Inge's alien registration card shows the middle name "Sara".

The Nazis forced all Jewish females to take the middle name Sara. Jewish males were forced to adopt the middle name, "Israel".

Inge as queen in a play.

Performed at the transit camp for women and children, Marseille, France (1941).

Four

I felt elation when we landed in New York! I remember seeing my mother's sister, Aunt Elsa and my mother's twin, Aunt Zilla who lived in Philadelphia. I could hardly wait to see my dear Oma, who lived in Chicago.

My mother let Lotte and I take a bus all the way to Chicago by our selves. My mother needed to stay in New York to meet with a lawyer. One of her uncles had died and left some money for her and each of her siblings. My mother had to prove that she was alive to claim the money that was rightfully hers.

We stayed with my Oma for a time in Hyde Park until my mother arrived. A distant cousin helped both my mother and sister get jobs in a hat factory. We got our own apartment at 54th and Kenwood but I stayed with my grandmother during the school week. Oma's apartment was near my grammar school and I was too young to be by myself when my mother and sister went to work in the factory. Funny, how I could be in a concentration camp at eight and too young to stay in an apartment alone at night at ten. I have a sense our apartment wasn't a very good one.

I took great pleasure from sharing an "Innerdoor" bed with my grandmother, the kind of bed that folded down from the wall. There was indoor plumbing and heat. I wasn't hungry anymore. My grandmother was a good cook and the food was good.

I was nine and I had had no formal schooling. My sister helped with the necessary school registration because my mother only spoke German. I started first grade when I was nine and didn't speak any English. It was very hard to be so different from all of the other children. I did not have any clothes that fit me and I felt that I didn't fit anywhere. I looked funny. I think people gave clothes to the "new refugee child". I felt very much like an outcast.

I couldn't relate to the German-Jewish community that seemed to be the social circle of my mother and my grandmother, aunt and uncle. The refugee subculture was a homogenous group and still spoke German. They seemed to deliberately separate from the American mainstream. I wanted to be like the other kids. To my delight, I was permitted to go to the reform temple instead of the conservative synagogue. Lessons were taught in English rather than Hebrew and I competed to be the top student. Here, I learned about Jewish history and graduated from Sunday school. Somewhere along the line I realized that I was permitted to go to the reform temple because it was free. My family, like other poor German Jewish refugees, did

not feel that the conservative temples opened doors to those who could not afford to pay their dues.

I began to identify with the black children in school. I soon realized that they were treated differently too. Even though Hyde Park was an integrated community in the 1940's, I could tell that the black children were treated differently from white children. I had a strong sense of the importance of civil rights at an early age. I think I had a kinship with being treated as an inferior.

I was very determined to be like everybody else quickly. I read everything in sight and played in the alley. I was a real scrappy alley type kid. Instinctively at nine, I knew I had to learn English and I had to speak without an accent and I had to Americanize my name. I changed my name from Inge; I couldn't stand how the teachers were pronouncing it. One day I just decided, my name was going to be Joan. I had my own world and a big realization: if I was going to survive, I needed to adapt. Up until the point when we arrived in the United States I was with people that were in the same boat, people with whom I could identify. It was very tough being so different and I knew inside me that I needed to attach again and belong.

I spoke English fluently within about a year. I spoke some French when I came over because some of the children I had been with were French. I used to have whole dreams in French. I tested well in school and had a couple of teachers who took an interest in me. I took the test for a scholarship to go to the University of Chicago Laboratory School. But, I couldn't go because I still had to buy books and we couldn't afford them. Also, things were so tough that education just wasn't a priority to anybody except me. Education was a huge priority to me. I can't remember a time when I didn't have the feeling: I gotta get educated, I gotta do something or I won't survive. I ended up completing eight years of grammar school in four and one-half years.

When I stayed with my Oma, we were not alone. Oma lived with her only son, my Uncle Louis. My uncle was married and had one child three years older than me. There was a lot of rivalry between my cousin and me. After all, he had to share his apartment, his life with me, this new person. I'm a lot more understanding of him now than I was back then. Most of the time I felt hurt, that nobody really wanted me. I remember playing with other kids outside and hearing the ice cream truck bells ringing. Kids would run and get their money. It never occurred to me that I could have what other children had, my expectations were quite low.

I don't remember close friends and I don't think we had a phone. I couldn't bring anyone home because my mother was gravely ill. Mother had

stopped working in the factory and began to work out of the house. She had a major surgery, a colostomy, the year after we arrived,. I didn't know she had cancer until six months before she died in 1948. My sister didn't know it either. I guess that wasn't unusual medical practice at the time; nobody talked about cancer.

I felt sadness. I had to ask for hugs from grown ups and I don't know if my requests were always welcome. I was told I was kind of cute and that helped. I think my Oma provided a lot more affection than my sister and my mother. So I decided I didn't need anything.

I was full of bravado. I went out and played in the alley, jumped rope, played marbles and read systematically everyday at the Blackstone Library. My real goal was to learn English as quickly as possible and talk like everybody else. Somehow, I succeeded. Eager to work, I got my first job washing dishes for my teacher when I was ten. The teacher paid me one quarter a week. I guess that teacher exploited me, but I was happy to earn a wage. I always gave the money to my mother and sister.

My sister married and was out of the house when I was twelve or thirteen. By then, my mother, grandmother and I were living together over a store on 55th Street. I continued to work after school, washing bobby pins, hairbrushes and combs at a beauty shop. I did a lot of babysitting and I would get to travel to Wisconsin with families to take care of children. Those were wonderful jobs.

When I was in high school I fit in more. I had a job as a stock girl at the Carson's department store. I remember owning some new clothes for the first time at age fifteen or sixteen. I started dating. I was kind of cute and I was asked out a lot. That was great. Sometimes my dates would bring me dresses from their sisters to wear. That was embarrassing but nice.

Then, when I was almost fifteen, my sister called me to her apartment in South Shore. She informed me that my mother had about six months to live.

I felt suicidal. I had had no idea my mother was going to die. I had lived with this strong fantasy that maybe my father really wasn't killed and that he would be back; we would be a happier family again. After all, we never were able to find out any detail about my father's death. I experienced a lot of guilt because I harbored a secret feeling. I felt if one parent had to go, my father would have taken better care of me. When I heard my mother was going to die, I thought that if I hadn't had these hidden thoughts and feelings my mother might not be dying. I still had very strong ambitions. I was in high school. I wanted to go to college. I wanted to become a lawyer and I didn't know how any of this was going to happen.

I already lived with shame, the kind of shame known only to children who have lost a parent. I felt less than everyone else. For so many years I didn't have what the other children had. I didn't have my father. I missed his warm comforting attention. I remembered my father enjoying me, romping and horseyback rides on his strong back, his laughter at my somersaults. I had already lost the secure feeling of being like other children who could casually remark about family.

I had seen myself as being able to function well throughout hardship because I sensed that I must have been well cared for and given plentiful love and affection in my early childhood. If both of my parents died it seemed that everything would disappear. My strong reoccurring dreams about the concentration camp came back. One was about rats. Trying to appease the rats, almost cartoon like images; throwing the animated rats food in order to keep them away from me. The other reoccurring dream was about jumping. Gulleys. There were gulleys in the camp, gigantic pockets of mud filled with water. I don't know how wide the treacherous holes were or if I jumped over them as part of the children's games that I played in the camp. I had many dreams about jumping over those gulleys and a grave sense of danger, would I make it or not? The reoccurring dreams have lasted into adulthood.

I now knew my survival dependend on going out, dating and trying to get on with my life independent of my family. As I tried to move onward separation became hard for my family. European ideas about dating were Victorian and religious superiority was used to control me. If I would only go out with a Jewish boy from the temple, dating would be acceptable. Otherwise, I was viewed a sinner. I felt like an outcast at home so I adopted an attitude of, "I really don't care". Also, about that time, I decided there wasn't any God. Everybody else was still observant and went to temple. I became an atheist.

**Photograph of Joan (Inge) Maas around age 16
Chicago, Illinois, U.S.A.**

Five

When I was fifteen and had just found out that my mother had six months to live, I met the person who would become my husband. I met David at a school function, a play. I ended up going to a gathering after the performance and there he stood. David was seventeen and he offered me a ride home. That night was the first time I told my whole story to someone. He was there for me.

David's family was truly accepting of me. He had a sister, June, seven years older and a mother and father, Sophie and William Rosenberg. They welcomed me. I had a new chance at a family and I loved David very much. Both of David's parents were born in the United States and were of Russian and Polish descent. David's family was Jewish but organized religion didn't have a leading role in the Rosenberg household. Brought up with a Jewish identity, David was given choices (after religious study he decided not to have a bar mitzvah) and ritual was not paired with comfort. Acceptance of others had nothing to do with heritage, religious or ethnic. William Rosenberg started a brass planter business that evolved into a successful trophy and award manufacturing company. Not all that interested in school, David was very creative and went into his family business after high school.

David and I were babysitting for his sister's children the night that my mother died. My mother had been in a coma and when I got home, my mother had already passed. I felt so guilty and I don't think my sister ever forgave me for going out that evening. I was fifteen and my mother was forty-eight. Except for the deep pangs of separation and isolation, the final loss of my mother was cold and numbing.

I was on my own with my grandmother for a few years. Although Oma and I had a good relationship, I had a rough time. My grandmother was seventy-seven. Her daughter and my mother had just died. I remember not being able to eat very much and being very thin. I struggled trying to keep house. I never had a name or diagnosis for my troubles. Whatever the circumstances, I was just going to find a way to make it.

I graduated high school when I was seventeen but I got kicked out of the public school, Hyde Park High, when I was sixteen. When I had learned that my mother was going to die, I went from being a straight A student with honors to cutting school. I saw my sister struggle too. She was married and had a child less than a year old. Her husband's parents lived with them. My brother-in-law, Walter Newman, was also a refugee although he hadn't been in a camp.

After my mother died, Walter became my guardian. I was very rebellious and angry. Conflict seemed constant and I was threatened with reform school. I think my sister was ready to sign the papers to send me away. Fortunately, we had a little bit of money, enough to pay for me to go to Central Y, a YMCA school in downtown Chicago. The hours were very good and I could get to my job quickly. I went back to getting straight A's. I was seventeen when I graduated.

Then came the realization that there was no way for me to go to college. There was no money. So, I got a job. I lied about my age and said I was twenty-one to get the position. I worked for a correspondence school owned by a Black man who needed a downtown office for many southern clients. I was the "white front" for a black correspondence school in tailoring.

David and I were married when I was eighteen and he was twenty. First, we found our own apartment in Hyde Park. When our oldest child, Stefani, was a year old we bought a house and moved to the suburb Northbrook. My Oma then moved to St. Louis, closer to my Aunt Mina and Uncle Albert. Our family blossomed with the birth of two more children, Nancy and Stan. My family became my greatest luxury and purpose.

I got my first car right after my second daughter was born. That was amazing to have a car! And I had a house and a dog and I had cats. I had three children to care for and a husband whom I loved very much, who rescued me from so much abandonment. The holocaust was not a prevalent part of child rearing as far as I was concerned. It just wasn't. I was here and my babies were more important than anything in the world. I was raising my children the way I would have wanted to be raised; total acceptance and love, and maybe the way I was raised early on. Nothing else mattered. I did not think that retelling holocaust stories had much to do with my survival during my young and mid adult years. Survival itself was the priority, and I was actively getting on with my life. First things first, I thought. Revisiting the past could be done at some other point in time.

David and I shared an irreverent sense of humor that pulled me through the flashbacks. Once our antics nearly landed David in jail. We had met at a bar one night after work and had driven separate cars. I had a bit to drink but insisted that I could drive myself home safely. Minutes later the blue lights spiraled in my rear view mirror and the policeman's orders barked through his megaphone. Belligerence was my first reaction to law enforcement. Fortunately, my attitude did not keep me from pulling over upon command. I denied the indignant truth when the officer accused me of

being intoxicated. I told the officer that I wasn't drunk, I was the administrator of a retirement hotel for senior citizens and perfectly capable of driving myself home. The officers thought otherwise and headed me to the police station. I called David to come get me while I waited and watched the police. Slowly, I began to regress. By the time my husband arrived, I was a wide-eyed frozen little girl back in Nazi Germany. Immediately, David recognized my shrunken state, fear looming large. Sitting together in a room of empty chairs, David's quick eyes scanned the space. He spotted a policeman's hat left inadvertently on the far chair. Smiling, David picked up the hat and began to imitate Groucho Marx. With eyebrows raised, an imaginary cigar and a policeman's hat on his head, my best friend strutted the room like Groucho. Laughing out loud, I zapped back to reality. The comic relief lasted an instant before the two police officers turned the door handle to enter. David slipped the policeman's hat into his coat without thinking. It was too late to pull it out. The officers led us to the front desk where David pledged to see me home. All the while one officer scratched his head and muttered that he couldn't remember where he left his hat.

We scurried to the car and David threw the hat in the trunk. This time, I arrived home first and the telephone rang. "They got the hat," David confessed. Now it was my turn to gear into action. We hadn't noticed that the policeman's badge adorned the hat, front and center. Stealing a policeman's hat was a serious offense. I called my sister-in-law and luckily she had enough cash for me to bail out David. The officers were steamed. We left the precinct with a court date, arrested for stealing a policeman's hat.

Our laughter dominated but we were both nervous about the court date. Fortunately, David did what he has always done best. He told the truth. The judge had a warm heart and he listened to David's unique explanation of my past and his rescue routine. The judge must have decided that no one could fabricate such a story. He made David promise never to steal another policeman's hat and doled out one year's probation.

Six

I finally got to college when my youngest child started first grade. Initially my husband thought my plans were great and had no problem with my return to school. Well, as long as studies didn't impact on family life. I was home to make dinner and my academic hours coincided with the children's schedule. My goal was to become an attorney. As time went on and I was more involved with school, my husband was not happy with my pursuits. I suppose I was beginning to drift a bit. At the point I was ready for law school I realized I needed to make a decision, my marriage or law school. I chose my marriage instead of law school.

So, I went on to get my Bachelor's degree. I majored in sociology and political science. I had a double major and graduated magna cum laude from Roosevelt University (one of the few schools sympathetic to older students back in 1963). There weren't many older students running around campuses, starting from scratch when I started college. I was a genuine odd ball once again. But a good odd ball; it was my choice this time.

I earned my degree in 1969 and started work as a Program Director for a retirement hotel. My property management experience evolved over the next twenty-six years. I worked as chief operating officer of property management for several companies and became the first woman president of the Chicago Chapter of the Institute of Real Estate Management. I have taken my professionalism quite seriously along with its code of ethics. For a good part of my career, I worked to improve social and low-income housing. I've been an Executive Director of a not for profit property management entity that specialized in affordable housing. Now, I'm in a new career, selling real estate. I love my work and have successfully reinvented my professional life. In fact, I won the Rookie of the Year award when I began using my broker's license at the age of sixty-three.

David and I divorced in 1993. Actually, we stopped living together years ago when our youngest graduated high school. Our flourishing children were off to college and David and I faced our empty nest and ourselves. It will suffice to say that we grew apart and decided mutually not to live together. Neither of us had ever lived alone. We sold the suburban house and each created our own homes back in city apartments. We were separated for seventeen years before finalizing a divorce. There was always a deep bond between us. Even after divorce, we would get together with the children on special occasions and holidays. My husband remarried. David thoughtfully planned his retirement, transferring ownership of the family

business entirely to our son and nephew just one year ago. Sadly, on his first vacation post retirement, David died in a snorkeling accident.

Who can know the depth of his spirit? David's presence is loving and tenacious.

Seven

I believe that my concentration camp experience gave me a fierce sense of independence as an adult. My self-reliance has helped me take great pride in my accomplishments. Work has pulled me through the best and worst of times and I continue to rely on work as if my survival depends on it. Resilience is ingrained within me but I cannot afford to be too dependent on anyone.

Survivor's guilt is ever present. I am somewhat apologetic for being alive. How could I not feel that way when I survived and millions of others did not? I've had an overwhelming need to ease suffering and when my children were born, a tremendous hope that they would leave the world a better place than they found it. I became active in civil rights and the peace movement. I've been involved in many causes but less so, as I've gotten older.

I'm not involved with Jewish religious activities and I react adversely to actions that smack of segregation. I believe oppression is oppression and whomever it's happening to, it's wrong. Accounts of people who experienced the holocaust need to be told and understood as much as anyone can understand. But the holocaust stories are no different than any violence inflicted on people simply because of whom they are or how they were born.

I have never been back to Germany. I did go to a Mannheim reunion that took place ten years ago in the Catskills. My sister and brother in-law were coming all the way from California and I viewed the gathering as an opportunity to see them. I went to the reunion but found it difficult to be present. Approximately one hundred and twenty-five people attended. I was the youngest person and didn't know anybody there. Isolation crept in and I felt like an outcast again. But, the reward was seeing my sister very happy; seeing my sister enjoy having reunions with people. My experience might have been richer if I were older and had the gift of time before the holocaust. I simply did not have a bank of traditions and happy memories. Many older survivors remembered a childhood followed by a period of time when they had a horrible life. After the holocaust many survivors had an ability to continue on with customs they had already known. Child survivors were well robbed of a childhood. For me, there was no going back to my past.

I have had to establish new traditions. Fortunately, I have welcomed raising my children without remembered ritual. I think that doing things differently made me a better mother.

My children grew up with a dilemma. They were unsure if it was all right to ask questions. When they proposed questions about the holocaust, I always gave truthful answers but those answers were usually followed with, “ but I don’t have much memory of that.” Consequently, their questions, my responses and our dialogue stopped short. On the other hand, when I did attempt to tell my stories, I thought that my children didn’t want to hear. My children knew that the past was dangerous for me and sensed the tragedy caused by anti-Semitism and the Nazis. The events and names of aunts, grandparents, cousins, concentration camps, cities and villages remained jumbled.

I had the opportunity to communicate my story during a videotaped interview for the Shoa Foundation in 1995. I participated because I wanted my story to be tangible to my grandchildren and I yearned to contribute to research. I hoped that students might connect facts or theories and understand the unique value of survivor’s stories. I trust that there must be some value in what happened to us. There aren’t many redeeming factors but maybe there is something to be learned.

The pieces of the puzzle continue to be placed carefully on the table. Truthfully, it is hard to tell what events are missing. Last week I allowed myself to think about our family’s survival and the weighty alternative to our survival, suicide. Both my mother and I contemplated suicide when life seemed impossible. In both circumstances, one assertive caring person helped stop suicide. My mother had my sister, Lotte, and I had my confidant, David.

My survival skills, probably developed while hiding under the barracks in the concentration camp, did not prepare me for surviving the death of my oldest daughter, Stefi. Stefi died after a six-year, long, and heroic battle against a cancer called Hodgkins Disease at the young age of 35. Surviving my daughter’s death is like no other experience; a portion of my soul is gone. Still, I identify myself as a survivor.

A fine line exists between my definition of a victim and a survivor. Living on and on as a survivor can translate into always feeling like a victim. To identify as a survivor, I must acknowledge that I was a victim. I can’t stand the idea of being a victim but I must embrace the facts so that I continue to move on with my life. Being a victim means staying stuck in the past. A key to my resilience is simply living in the present and giving myself ample time to remember the past.

A survivor gives life to others. Becoming an Oma is a most delicious and enlightening gift. I now have five grandchildren. My daughter, Stefi left

a five year old when she died. Jessie is now seventeen years old. Both Nancy and Stan have two boys, ages seven and nine. My children and my grandchildren are the most important part of my life. They are everything. As close as we feel toward one another, I still lead a life alone. It is important to me not to lead anybody else's life.

Remembrance is only as vital as its relevance to the present. Potent lessons about the dangers of prejudging others require consistent repetition to help overcome the residual effects of abusive power. Heightened sensitivity to stereotypes, a sixth sense, can be shared through stories of selfless acts carried out by the people who tried to rescue each other during the holocaust.

People all over the world are surviving both personal losses and oppression right now. I hope that we can recognize in ourselves the subtle ways that we look away from pain and the overt ways that we oppress others. I hope that we can nurture tolerance and speak out against prejudice for it only provides a damaging, false sense of security.

Innocent questions from children about the holocaust will continue to blossom. Simple answers may lead to a path toward accepting the incomprehensible.

ADDENDUM

The following essay depicts my nine year-old child's understanding of his Grandmother's survival. Children can safely absorb and integrate Holocaust history given the support and opportunity to ask questions.

My Grandma in World War II

By Avi Chertok, December 10, 2000

4th Grade

This is a story about my grandma Joan Maas. She was a German girl in World War II and now is a regular American. For the first five years of her life she was living safely with her family. Then on November 10, 1938 the Nazis attacked. They smashed the windows of Jewish owned businesses and shops. The Nazis also burned down their temples. One day, in 1939, Nazis took Joan's father away. Then a year later her father was killed. Then that year uniformed men came into their apartment in Mannheim Germany. The men said to pack your bags and bring as much as you can carry except money. Then in one hour they came back and took them away. So my grandmother went to the train station with her mom Stefani and her sister Lotte. They were taken to a concentration camp in the Pyrenees Mountains in France.

When they arrived the children were separated from the adults into areas called illos. Adult men and women also were separated into different illos. In my grandmother's barrack there were about 13-15 kids. In the different areas it was very muddy. They did have heat by stove and no electricity. There were large rats, which Joan was frightened of. Luckily she found a cat, kept it and named it Mule (Mulla). There were guards all over and barbed wire. All there was to sleep on was hay and to eat mostly turnip soup. All there was to do for fun was to play games. I don't know of any that they played because my grandma couldn't remember any. They still celebrated Jewish holidays like Passover and got gifts. They got no donations for their camp. There were about 10,000 people in her camp. At her camp [Camp de Gurs] they drank watery coffee. As I said they ate turnip soup and a 1/8 of a loaf of bread daily.

Even though they didn't have much they shared what they had. One day one of the men got a potato for working. So he shared it with his wife

who shared it with Joan and her family. To this day my grandma still remembers the potato. So even the most important items were shared.

Every once in a while a rumor ran around that the children were going to be taken away. So my grandma hid under a barrack to hide. Though it never happened to her other children might have been taken away.

My grandma's Aunt Mina and Uncle Albert lived in the U.S.A. Her Uncle's brother was close to the president, Franklin Roosevelt. So he asked the people in the government to help get my grandma and her family to America. So after signing many papers my grandma was off to America!

Her ship, The Exeter left from Portugal. They left Europe November 24th and arrived at Ellis Island on the 8th of December 1941, the day after Pearl Harbor. My grandma, Joan, was worried that she might not dock because the Americans were at war. My grandma remembers she was on a passenger ship. She was very happy to be here when she arrived at Ellis Island. Luckily every one was healthy except for my great grandmother who was very sick but made it through Ellis Island.

My grandma moved to Chicago after a short stay in New York. Everything was different from the concentration camp. They had heat, good food and electricity. She didn't know any English and started in 1st grade at the age of 9. My grandma was able to learn English extremely quick. She might of learned so quickly from going to the library every day.

Through her grammar school years my grandma stayed with her grandma during the weekdays. Her grandma's apartment was by my grandma's school. While she stayed at her grandma's apartment, her mom and sister worked at a factory.

My grandma had finished grammar school in about four years. She was smarter than most children her age. When she was in high school she met my grandpa David Rosenberg. He helped my grandma feel accepted. He was the first person who ever heard my grandma's story. So they got married and had children. Their daughter, Nancy, grew up and had me.

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